WHAT MAKES LEADERS UNDERSTOOD

Why the best leaders say things more than once, more than one way

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For years, one idea has quietly shaped how leaders are trained to communicate: that people learn best when you match your delivery to their preferred style - visual, auditory, reading, kinaesthetic. It sounds intuitive. It has also been tested for roughly fifteen years, and the research verdict is unambiguous: it doesn't work. Matching instruction to someone's stated learning style produces no measurable improvement in outcomes (Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer & Bjork, 2008). The brain does not have separate channels waiting to be unlocked by the right delivery format.

What actually works is far more useful, and far more within a leader's control: **multimodal communication** - explaining an idea more than one way. This consistently outperforms any single "matched" style, for everyone, regardless of what they claim to prefer.

That distinction matters more today than it did a decade ago, because the people leaders are communicating with have changed.

Between 15% and 20% of the global population is neurodivergent (Doyle, 2020). Among Gen Z specifically, more than half now identify as neurodivergent - a generation that already makes up over a quarter of the workforce (State of Neurodiversity and Workforce Performance, 2026). Neurodivergence isn't confined to junior ranks waiting to be developed into leaders: one industry survey found that 45% of C-level executives and 32% of senior managers self-identify as neurodivergent (CYPHER Learning, cited in UNLEASH, 2024). Communication style in leadership has stopped being a matter of personal preference. It is now a matter of competence.

The Real Mechanism: Why This Actually Happens

It's tempting to frame this as a delivery problem on the leader's side, or a processing problem on the listener's side. Current research says it's neither, on its own. The clearest explanation comes from the double empathy problem, first proposed by autistic researcher Damian Milton (2012) and substantially developed since: when two people with meaningfully different ways of processing the world communicate, the breakdown in understanding runs in both directions, not one (Milton, Gurbuz & López, 2022). A neurotypical leader doesn't automatically read a neurodivergent employee's meaning correctly, any more than the reverse is true. Neither side has a deficit. The mismatch sits between them.

A 2025 review in Strategy & Leadership makes the leadership implication explicit: what looks like a listener failing to grasp an instruction is frequently a leader saying something that only fully lands for people who process information the way the leader does (Illingworth & Hiddlestone-Mumford, cited in Strategy & Leadership, 2025). The fix isn't asking neurodivergent employees to adapt harder. It's building communication habits that don't depend on everyone sharing the leader's default mode in the first place.

A Closer Look: What About NLP?

Neuro-linguistic programming makes a more specific claim than the general "learning styles" idea, and it's worth addressing directly, because it's taught in some coaching and leadership training as though it were established fact. NLP proposes that a person has a dominant sensory processing channel - visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic - that shows up in their language ("I see what you mean" versus "that sounds right" versus "I can't grasp it"), and that this can be further detected through eye movement direction, known as eye-accessing cues.

This has been tested directly and repeatedly since the late 1970s. Sharpley (1984) and Heap (1988) both reviewed the predicate-matching research and found no reliable correlation between someone's language patterns and a fixed sensory-processing dominance. Eye-accessing cues have fared no better: controlled studies from Thomason, Arbuckle & Cady (1980) through to Wiseman & Watt (2012) have found no reliable correlation between eye movement direction and either sensory processing or deception. A 2012 systematic review of NLP's effects on health outcomes (Sturt et al., British Journal of General Practice) found only ten experimental studies existed across the entire evidence base, most methodologically weak, with no consistent evidence of benefit. The specific mechanism NLP proposes has been tested and not supported.

This doesn't mean the techniques are worthless - it means the theory behind them is wrong. Asking a client "what does that look like for you" is still a genuinely good coaching question. It works because sensory-specific language makes abstract things concrete, not because it has revealed the client's one true internal channel.

The part worth dropping is the diagnostic move: profiling someone as "primarily visual" from their language and then only ever communicating with them that way afterwards. That repeats the exact mistake this article opened with - and the fix is the same one: use sensory-rich, concrete language with everyone, rather than detecting and locking onto a single channel for any one person.

One practical caution applies here regardless of the theory: ask one sensory question at a time. "What does that look like for you, what does it sound like, how does it feel in your body" asked as a single stacked question invites the client to answer whichever part is easiest and quietly drop the rest. Ask "what does that look like for you?" Let it land. Then, if it's useful, follow up with "what does that feel like in your body?" as its own question. This is the same principle as the compound-instruction problem described below - stacking several questions into one turn dilutes all of them.

Where This Actually Shows Up

This isn't abstract. It plays out in some of the highest-stakes communication moments in any organisation - and it's worth looking at three in detail.

1: The Boardroom
The board chair briefing directors on a major decision

A verbal walkthrough at the meeting, however articulate, is only one channel. The 2025 NACD Public Company Board Practices & Oversight Survey found that directors' top complaint wasn't disagreement over strategy - it was the absence of shared clarity around expectations in the first place (NACD, 2025). PwC's guidance to executives preparing for board meetings is explicit on the fix: provide focused, concise pre-read materials distributed at least a week ahead, built around one clear core message, so the live discussion builds on shared understanding rather than establishing it in real time (PwC, 2025). Put bluntly by one governance commentator: "A room full of nodding directors can still walk out with four different interpretations of what was just decided" (Blackthorn, 2026). The pre-read plus the verbal discussion plus a written summary of decisions taken isn't belt-and-braces. It's the minimum for a room where people are working from different mental models of the same information.

2: The All-Staff Announcement
HR communicating a policy change to the whole organisation

A 2025 international study of over 3,500 employees found that 78% of people who said their organisation's vision and strategy was "easy to understand" rated internal communication as excellent or very good - compared with just 3% among those who found it unclear (Staffbase, 2025). The same study found 12% of non-desk employees (21% in the UK) say they never receive communication directly from senior leadership at all. Separately, Axios HQ's 2025 State of Internal Communications report put a figure on the cost: ineffective communication costs organisations an estimated $54,860 a year for every senior employee earning over $200,000, largely in time spent firefighting confusion and re-explaining decisions that were only said once (Axios HQ, 2025). A single all-staff email announcing a policy change reaches everyone's inbox. It does not mean everyone understood the same thing from it.

3: The Cybersecurity Briefing
IT communicating a new security requirement to non-technical staff

Security teams have learned this the hard way. One in-depth study of a security awareness programme's transformation found that its turning point was the deliberate move away from technical jargon: the team began actively translating security concepts into plain language tailored to what different employee groups actually needed to do, rather than issuing one uniform technical bulletin to the whole company (arXiv, 2023). Cybersecurity is a domain where the format of the warning genuinely determines whether it's acted on: an email full of protocol references may be accurate and still be functionally invisible to the person it's meant to protect. The same message - "here's what phishing looks like, here's exactly what to do if you see it" - needs a plain-language version, a visual example, and a specific action step, not one dense technical memo assumed to cover everyone.

None of this is a deficiency in the listener. It is a mismatch in delivery - and mismatches in delivery are entirely within a leader's power to fix.

The Business Case, Not Just the Fairness Case

This is not only an inclusion argument. It's a performance one. Hewlett Packard Enterprise found neurodiverse teams were 30% more productive than comparable teams, and JPMorgan Chase's Autism at Work initiative reported employees making fewer errors and being 90–140% more productive than neurotypical peers in equivalent roles (both cited in Neurodiversity in the Workplace, 2025). Yet only a small minority of organisations have structured accommodation practices in place - an estimated 7% globally have a formal neurodiversity plan (Cognassist, 2025).

The cost shows up in careers too. In a 2024 Harris Poll survey for Understood.org, 59% of neurodivergent respondents said they worry that disclosing their neurodivergence would harm their career, and 60% said they feel stigma simply asking for support (Understood.org / Harris Poll, 2024). Whatever an organisation's formal policy says, it is the communication norms in the room - the boardroom, the all-staff call, the security briefing - that quietly decide who gets heard, who gets promoted, and who gets trusted with bigger things.

Four Things Leaders Can Actually Do

1: Say it more than once - and more than one way. Explain the important things verbally and in writing. A board decision gets a pre-read and a written summary, not just a discussion. A policy change gets an email and a manager-led conversation, not just an announcement. A security requirement gets a plain-language example, not just a technical bulletin. Don't treat this as redundant - treat it as the default.

2: Make the implicit explicit. Trade vague developmental language - "be more strategic," "show more initiative" - for concrete, observable criteria. If you can't describe what the behaviour would actually look like in a real situation, the instruction isn't ready to give yet, to anyone.

3: Separate the headline, the detail, and the reasoning. Lead with the conclusion, follow with the supporting detail, and make your reasoning explicit rather than assumed. This isn't simplifying anything. It's structuring information so people can engage at the level they need, instead of forcing everyone through the same narrative path to get there.

4: Ask one question at a time. The same stacking problem shows up in questions as in instructions. "What does that look like, what does it sound like, how does it feel" asked in one breath invites a person to answer whichever part is easiest and drop the rest. Ask one. Let it land. Then ask the next one, as its own question, only if it's still useful.

The Takeaway

Communicating only in the mode that feels natural to you might feel efficient. It isn't. The double empathy research is clear that the gap runs both ways - but the leader is the one with the platform, the repetition, and the resources to close it. The research doesn't ask leaders to diagnose anyone's learning style or personality type. It asks something simpler, and entirely within reach: build the habit of explaining what matters more than one way, as standard practice, for every audience, every time - in the boardroom, in the all-staff message, and in the security briefing alike.

Where to Start

Pick one message you're about to send this week - a board pre-read, a policy announcement, a security requirement. Before you send it, ask yourself: have I said this only one way? Add the second one - the written follow-up to the verbal conversation, the concrete example next to the abstract instruction, the plain-language headline before the detail.

That one habit, repeated consistently, is what separates leaders who are simply heard from leaders who are genuinely understood.

If you'd like support building this into how your leadership team communicates, get in touch:
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